

Abernathy To Testify FBI, Police Aided Ray

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WASHINGTON — Dr. Ralph Abernathy said Wednesday he is prepared to testify next week that the FBI and Memphis police helped "conspirators" get James Earl Ray out of Memphis in plotting the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. 10 years ago. He also said he fears for Ray's life when Ray leaves Brushy Mountain State Prison in Tennessee next week to travel to Washington to testify about King's murder.

Dr. Abernathy, in whose arms King died, is scheduled as the initial witness Monday in the first public hearing by a House Select subcommittee investigating King's assassination.

Rep. Harold Ford of Memphis will be allowed to be the first member of the subcommittee to question Abernathy.

Abernathy, in an interview with The Commercial Appeal Wednesday, said he has received a typewritten letter from Ray promising that Ray will tell enough at hearings next week to "lead the police to the real killer" if he can get a new trial.

Abernathy said the letter also pleaded for President Carter to "intercede" to guarantee the new trial.

"I'm with that wholeheartedly," Abernathy said of Ray's proposition. "He says he has the information. He will tell enough that will actually lead the police to the real killer of Martin Luther King."

Abernathy predicted the net effect of week's testimony before the subcommittee will be to "put us on the track of the real killer" of Dr. King.



Dr. Abernathy

Abernathy said Ray's letter confessed that Ray dislikes blacks, but that he did not murder King.

"He was honest enough to say he doesn't like blacks," Abernathy said of the letter he received last week. "But he said emphatically he did not kill Dr. King, but he has an idea of someone who supplied him the money."

Abernathy said the "money" was that

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used to aid Ray to leave Memphis and to finally reach England following King's murder.

Abernathy said he believes Ray was aided by the FBI and the Memphis police in the exodus, and that he is suspicious that Ray's escape from the Missouri prison before King's murder was engineered by someone.

"If given a new trial he would reveal the names and information that would lead the police to the real killers of Martin Luther King," Abernathy said.

"I'm not convinced he (Ray) didn't pull the trigger," he said. "He may have been the trigger puller. But I'm not convinced there weren't more people involved."

Abernathy said Ray's letter — which he said was signed in "what looked like Ray's signature" — was "well written." He said he thinks someone helped Ray compose it.

Abernathy declined to say why he believes the FBI and Memphis police aided conspirators in helping Ray to leave Memphis following King's murder.

"I don't think James Earl Ray could have gotten out of Memphis (without conspiratorial help)," he said.

He said he wants House investigators next week to ask him "in depth" about his views, including those that a conspiracy exists.

Other sources indicated Wednesday there is no real "hard evidence" that Abernathy can give linking the FBI or any member of the Memphis police to a conspiracy, but that testimony may clearly show the FBI "set the tone" for conditions leading to King's death.

Abernathy, however, said he is convinced the FBI was involved in a conspiracy, and that testimony will show "The FBI and the Memphis police cooperated with the conspirators."

Asked if he meant to say the Memphis police were involved in a conspiracy, Abernathy replied, "To some degree."

Abernathy said he once visited with former FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover to ask how the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and King, then its leader, could win Hoover's friendship.

"He told me to tell him (King) to be a good boy, to live a certain way, to watch his morals," Abernathy said. "He asked me, 'Is he doing anything wrong?' and I said, 'Not that I know of.'"

Abernathy said he is still concerned

that conspirators may want to silence Ray.

"My only hope — let's say worry — is for his safety," Abernathy said. "I just hope he'll get out of the Brushy Mountain prison and back. It's a conspiracy, I believe, and conspirators will go a long way to silence truth."

Abernathy spent time behind closed doors with investigators Wednesday. He said he testified in closed session for five straight hours two months ago.

"They want me to put the whole thing in historic perspective," Abernathy said of his lead-off testimony Monday at the Russell House Office Building.

Abernathy, 51, pastor of the West Hunter Street Baptist Church in Atlanta, was chairman of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) at the time of King's murder.

He was considered one of King's closest friends and shared a meal with the slain civil rights leader at Memphis's Lorraine Motel the night of King's murder.

Abernathy said Wednesday a movement is underway in the SCLC to draft him as its new president when the organization meets in annual convention at Birmingham next week. He is president emeritus.

He declined to say whether he would accept, but said there are those who feel the organization is "becoming another Urban League," meaning it is not so outspoken these days on social matters.

Abernathy said the SCLC must be the "moral conscience" of blacks in America.

He said he thinks the public assassination hearings will prove to the nation that there are members of Congress who also believe conspirators were involved in King's death and that they are trying to do something about it.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Coretta Scott King, widow of Dr. King, told The Commercial Appeal she feels the House subcommittee is "doing an effective job."

There has been repeated criticism, renewed in recent days, that the committee will produce no real new evidence in the King murder.

"I am very pleased the investigation (public hearing) is going to take place," Mrs. King said. "I think there's need for it. In that regard, some of the things we have not known about will come out."

Mrs. King, who met with investigators in closed session Wednesday, said she has been told not to talk about any specifics prior to the public hearing.